

MOVIE on the

STORY BY MIKE LATONA

SEXUAL HARASSMENT

A couple of years ago, Tracy Hartley recalled, a carload of teenage boys followed her and some female friends walking home after school. Along the way, she said, the boys called out sexually suggestive remarks that the girls tried to ignore.

"They kept talking, and they got out of the car," said Tracy, 14, a parishioner at St. Mary of the Lake Church in Watkins Glen.

Although none of the boys made physical contact with the girls, Tracy said, she was so upset by the incident she no longer takes lightly any sexual language directed toward her.

"Ever since then, I've taken those comments very seriously. It makes me very uncomfortable," she said, adding that she can't be sure if a sexual advance "is actually going to happen" once it's suggested.

Meanwhile, Jennie Santo found that she could not easily brush off some blatantly sexual remarks a male friend once made to her.

"They were little perverted comments," said Jennie, 15, from St. Leo's Church in Hilton. Although she said she didn't think the friend would harm her, she did eventually end the friendship.

These incidents qualify as sexual harassment, said Katy Allen, an educational trainer from Fairport who conducts seminars on sexual harassment prevention in Rochester-area schools, public and

Catholic.

Allen defines sexual harassment as an *unwanted, uninvited or unwelcome attention of a sexual nature that interferes with a person's life*. It can come in the form of a behavior, word, gesture, look or touch. The "attention" — whatever form it takes — has to relate to sexual body parts, or the things we do with those body parts.

Allen suggested that instances of sexual harassment should not be reported to the police, because they are not actually considered crimes.

"It's illegal in public only if it escalates into sexual assault," Allen said. However, she emphasized that school officials are obligated to assist students who feel they are being sexually harassed at school. Allen added that guidance counselors and psychologists are also good resources for anybody who may be encountering sexual harassment outside of school.

Most incidents of sexual harassment, Allen said, involve the male as the instigator and the female as the victim. However, girls can also commit sexual harassment toward boys — especially in early adolescence, when girls are more physically mature than boys and feel they have greater power and control.

Allen added that any verbal attack on a gender — such as a boy calling another boy a "fag" — also qualifies as sexual harassment.

Sexual harassment is a tricky issue, Allen said, because no two situations are exactly the same.

"One size does not fit all," Allen remarked.

A good guideline, she said, is to separate sexual harassment from flirting.

"Flirting is mutually respectful," Allen explained.

"I take flirting as talking to a guy, laughing and having a good time," Tracy explained. However, she said, remarks containing the word "sex" makes her uncomfortable. She noted that if someone told her she was *pretty*, that would not be harassment — but she'd feel much differently if the word *sexy* was used instead.

"I don't think that word should be used," Tracy commented.

Jamie Winters said she's not offended by all sexual remarks she hears, unless it

"Hey baby, you're looking sexy today"

seems that the person is serious.

"You can tell that some people are joking, and others are not," said Jamie, 16, from St. Patrick's Church in Owego.

Allen added that common sense should be used before one makes remarks that *might* be construed as sexual harassment.

"When we're going to be overtly sexual with someone, we'd better make sure they're going to like it ahead of time," she said.

"You've got to know the person a little.

"I'm going to look through your window tonight"

While some people might laugh it off, others may take it seriously. You've got to look at each individual case," agreed Dan Letendre, 17, a parishioner at St. John of Rochester Church in Perinton.

At his supermarket job, Dan found out that there are indeed people who take sexually suggestive remarks seriously. A male co-worker, he said, was demoted because of complaints that he had sexually harassed female employees.

On the other hand, Sandy Bakken thinks that many girls overreact, mistaking flirtations for sexual harassment.

"Why don't we stop talking to women altogether? Why talk to them if they're going to yell at us all the time?" said Sandy, 17. He and Dan recently studied sexual harassment as part of a Christian human sexuality course for seniors at McQuaid Jesuit High School.

However, Allen contended that sexual harassment can lead to more serious sexual offenses — so caution is advised at all times.

"It's not going to stop escalating if it's not confronted," she said.

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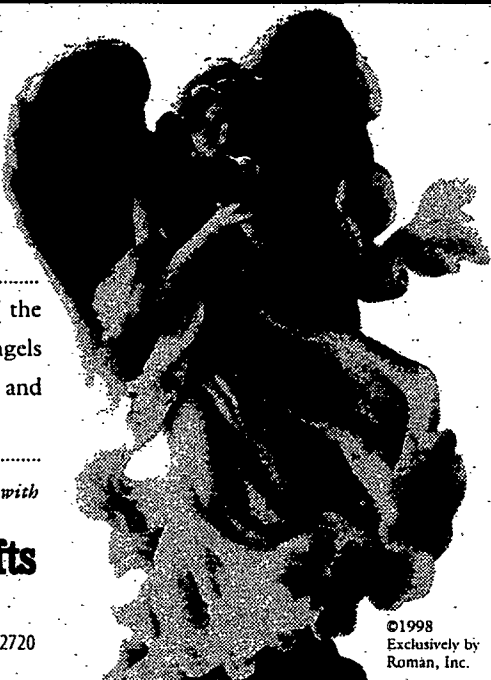
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